

Chrysalis (Marble Fork Kaweah River)

Rating: 4-C3 R IV *****

Time: 10-14 hours

Season: Low: July-Sept Norm: Aug-Sept High: Aug-Sept

Number of Raps: 10 plus 1 jump

Longest Rap: ~140ft

Gear: 2x 200ft rope, 150ft webbing, 10 rapides, bolt kit, wetsuit, neoprene gloves, technical canyoneering gear

Rubber: At least 4mm/3mm. 5mm or more recommended under most conditions.

Hazards: Powerful flow, long raps in waterfalls, natural anchors, rock fall hazard. A very long one-day route. An excellent understanding of class C canyoneering technique and basic natural anchor skills are required.

Vehicle: Passenger car

Car Shuttle: About 11.4mi of slow going

Approach: 1/2mi

Exit: 3.6mi

Good Eats: Bring your own, there's not much for miles.

Camping: Potwisha Campground in Sequoia NP is very convenient and offers a lively scene on weekends. There are other campgrounds in Sequoia NP and Sequoia NF that might offer quieter digs.

Introduction:

Imagine a canyon carved out of white marble with raging waterfalls that feed emerald green pools. That is Chrysalis canyon and it is an incredibly special place in the Sierra. A descent of Chrysalis is both intimidating and awe inspiring. Arriving at the bottom end of the canyon is like a rebirth into the world. For the experienced and highly competent canyoneer, a descent of Chrysalis is pure joy and a day that won't soon be forgotten.

All the water that flows through Chrysalis canyon comes naturally from snowmelt high in the Sierra. During the early summer and well into July in most years the flow in Chrysalis will be raging and far too high for a canyoneering descent. The canyoneer must time his/her descent for later in the season when the flow has subsided to a reasonable level. Fortunately the beginning of the route provides many opportunities to gauge the flow while the canyon is still relatively easily reversible. Even so, attempting a descent of Chrysalis under high flow conditions would be extremely dangerous and is not recommended.

Driving Directions:

From Giant Forest in Sequoia National Park head west on CA-198 about 2.5 miles to signed Crystal Cave Rd.. Turn Right on Crystal Cave Rd. and go 0.8 miles to the first major bend in the road to the right. Park in a small pullout that can fit 2 cars on the left side of the road at this bend. This is the upper trailhead.

Flow Check: A great place to check the flow in the Marble Fork before making the approach to the canyon is at a bridge over the river about 1 mile further down Crystal Cave Rd.. Drive down to the bridge, peer over the side and make your decision.

To reach the lower trailhead return to CA-198 and continue west and downhill 10.6 miles through the Generals Highway switchbacks to the Potwisha campground. The going is slow through the switchbacks but the views are incredible. If you are not camping at the Potwisha campground, park at the Marble Falls trailhead at the back of the campground. This is the lower trailhead. There are bear boxes provided by the NPS at the trailhead and the NPS is very serious about you using them for anything that smells in your car. If a bear breaks into your car because you didn't put something in the bear box the NPS will fine you for your trouble!

Approach:

From the upper trailhead hike downhill southwest cross-country generally following the lateral ridge that starts at the trailhead. Your goal is to more or less follow this ridge to the point where a small, unnamed drainage meets the Marble Fork Kaweah River. At first travel is easy through open forest. However, soon brush clogs the ridge top. Bypass brushy sections by going left (south) but don't deviate too far before regaining the rounded ridge. If you do get off route to the left (south) of the ridge you will end up in the unnamed stream while still high. This is not the end of the world but will require a bit of bushwhacking in the little watercourse to get down to the river. Be very careful not to end up off route to the right (north) of the ridge as the terrain is very steep here and leads to cliffs above the Marble Fork. If you manage to stay on route on the ridge, about halfway down the terrain steepens but careful progress can still be made. Near the bottom of the ridge when you can see both the small side drainage and the river below you, head slightly left and enter the side drainage just above its confluence with the river. Follow the drainage a short way to the Marble Fork and a wonderful swim hole.



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Canyon:

Safety Note: On August 9th 2008, a group of experienced canyoneers descended Chrysalis at what turned out to be very high flow. The route was doable but very difficult and dangerous at times due to rappels in very heavy flow, high current and hydraulics. It was difficult to tell that the flow was high until the beginning of the technical section. All parties descending Chrysalis should make a sober evaluation of the flow level at the entrance to the technical section. If what you see at the first rappel scares you, reverse the route out. IT GETS ALOT HARDER downstream. Once past the first and second rappels you are fully committed to the route. THERE IS NO ESCAPE UNTIL THE END.

Get suited and geared up at the wonderful swim hole and behold the mighty Marble Fork canyon that is laid out before you. There is no marble here to speak of but be patient it is coming. When you are ready, start swimming and scrambling downstream.

The first part of the canyon is a river scrambling fest. Typically you will swim a pool and then downclimb through large blocks. The obstacles are moderately difficult and the going is surprisingly fast. About ¼ mile in you'll find one rappel to overcome a particularly large pile of blocks.

Rap 1: 20 feet from a large dead log on the RIGHT (LDC) (this will probably get washed out and a new anchor will need to be established). This is a single drop that gets you past a large pile of blocks.

From here the river scramble continues and seems to get a bit easier. More importantly, marble starts to appear, first as single isolated blocks. Soon, you reach a section of canyon with towering walls on the right (LDC). Closer inspection reveals that the walls are composed of marble! The Marble blocks in the watercourse get more numerous and whiter in color. Just when you are starting to think that this marble is cool but when is the canyon going to steepen up you reach an amazing place.

The canyon makes a sharp turn to the right under towering walls and cascades into a marble hallway. Suddenly everything is white in a long straight watery corridor. Downclimb through the cascades as swim though the hallway. It's magical.

From the end of the hallway a few more downclimbs on the RIGHT (LDC) over surreal blocks of marble lead to an emerald green pool and the beginning of the technical section. From this pool you can clearly

sense the canyon falling away just beyond. Swim the pool and get ready for the action.

Rap 2: 40 feet from a boulder on the LEFT (LDC). This is a single drop that heads right (LDC) in the watercourse and over ledges to a small alcove tucked above a large falls. There is rock fall danger here so be careful.

Rap 3: 140 feet from a boulder on the RIGHT (LDC) in the back of the small alcove. This is a single drop down through the teeth of a large falls in a curving slot and into an amazing pool. This rap is intense and one of the hallmarks of the route. Set the rope length or be prepared for a floating disconnect. There is rock fall danger in the alcove above this drop.

Rap 4: 100 feet from 2 bolts on the LEFT (LDC). This is a single drop into a pool that meets a falls about halfway down. Set the rope length or be prepared for a floating disconnect. Continue downcanyon.

Rap 5: 60 feet from 2 bolts on the LEFT (LDC) that are a little difficult to locate as they are up on a ledge about 10 feet above the watercourse. This is a single drop that leads into another incredible hanging pool. Set the rope length or be prepared for a floating disconnect. **Look for the canyon register on a ledge above the ledge with the anchor. It's in an ammo can, please sign it.**

Rap 6: 90 feet from 2 bolts on the RIGHT (LDC). This is a single drop beside a falls and into a pool. This is a single drop that can go either to the side of or through a curtain falls. Going through the falls reveals that the line of rappel is actually behind the falls, a spectacular experience! Set the rope length or be prepared for a floating disconnect.

Swim the pool at the bottom of rap 6 and upclimb on slabs on the RIGHT (LDC).

Rap 7: 130 feet from a tree on the RIGHT (LDC). This is a single drop that leads to the edge of a pool.

Scramble and downclimb downcanyon on the right (LDC) through large blocks a short ways. When you reach what appears to be a large falls look for the next rap anchors on the right above the watercourse about 20 feet.

The next set of obstacles consists of a two-station rappel through a twisting set of boulders and over a falls and should be staged. Send one person down rap 8 on one rope and have them establish rap 9 with the second rope and wait there. All other members of

the party should then descend rap 8 and transfer onto the rope for rap 9 and continue to the pool below. Do not try to bypass the rap 9 station, as the rope pull would be very difficult. The last person down pulls the rope from rap 8 and continues down rap 9 with the pull for that rappel as well.

Rap 8: 25 feet from a boulder on the RIGHT (LDC) to a curving slanted ledge. This is a single drop with a very awkward start. Make sure the webbing extends over the lip or you may stick your rope.

Rap 9: 60 feet from the lone tree on the LEFT (LDC) just above the slanting ledge. This is a double drop that goes first to a shallow watery ledge that a falls is crashing onto and then descends through a lower falls to the pool below. Set the rope length or be prepared for a floating disconnect. This is another exciting rappel.

Rap 10: 90 feet from a boulder on the RIGHT (LDC) on a ledge about 15 feet above the watercourse. This is a single drop that descends beside a lovely slab falls.

Upclimb a short wall at the base of rap 10 and downclimb the other side to rejoin the watercourse. Scramble down canyon a short distance. When the watercourse starts to funnel down again and marble reappears exit the watercourse on the left (LDC) and climb over slabs to the final obstacle of the route.

Jump 1: 30 feet from ledges on the LEFT (LDC) to a fantastic pool framed in marble. This is a magical end to a magical route but should be approached with caution. The jump area has both an upper and lower ledge. The upper ledge is 35-40 feet above the pool and the lower ledge is 30 feet above the pool. At first inspection it would seem that the jump can be made from the upper ledge but beware the pool below is not as deep as it looks. In 2007 it was no more than 8-9 feet deep in the landing area and jumpers touched bottom (fairly softly) when jumping from the lower ledge. Be sure to send a canyoneer down on a rope to check the depth of the pool. Do not attempt the jump from either ledge if the depth is less than 8 feet.

Swim the pool and pack up on the marble slabs.

Exit:

From the last pool it is still 3.6 miles of hiking back to the lower trailhead. Continue scrambling downstream making your way to the left (LDC) side of the watercourse. Going is easy and it is not hard to keep your feet out of the water. Pick up the Marble Falls trail on the left (LDC) after a short distance and follow

it first up then mostly down as it meanders along the canyonside back to the lower trailhead and your car spot.

Non-Technical:

Non-technical hikes can enjoy fantastic swimming holes at both the start and finish of Chrysalis canyon. The pools found at the end of the approach to the canyon are world-class swim holes and are very, very secluded. The last pool found 3.6 miles up the Marble Falls trail is set in beautiful marble and is equally world-class. Chances for solitude here are also good as the trek up the Marble Falls trail in the summer heat is an amazing filter.



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